

The fourteenth century was disastrous for Britain as well as most of Europe, because of the effect of wars and plagues. Probably one-third of Europe's population died of plague. Hardly anywhere escaped its effects.

Britain and France suffered, too, from the damages of war. In the 1330s England began a long struggle against the French Crown. In France villages were raided or destroyed by passing armies. France and England were exhausted economically by the cost of maintaining armies. England had the additional burden of fighting the Scots, and maintaining control of Ireland and Wales, both of which were trying to throw off English rule.

It is difficult to measure the effects of war and plague on fourteenth-century Britain, except in deaths. But undoubtedly one effect of both was an increasing challenge to authority. The heavy demands made by the king on gentry and merchants weakened the economic strength of town and countryside but increased the political strength of the merchants and gentry whenever they provided the king with money. The growth of an alliance between merchants and gentry at this time was of the greatest importance for later political developments, particularly for the strength of Parliament against the king in the seventeenth

century, and also for the strength of society against the dangers of revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. Finally, the habit of war created a new class of armed men in the countryside, in place of the old feudal system of forty days' service. These gangs, in reality local private armies, damaged the local economy but increased the nobles' ability to challenge the authority of the Crown. Already in 1327 one king had been murdered by powerful nobles, and another one was murdered in 1399. These murders weakened respect for the Crown, and encouraged repeated struggles for it amongst the king's most powerful relations. In the following century a king, or a king's eldest son, was killed in 1461, 1471, 1483 and 1485. But in the end the nobles destroyed themselves and as a class they disappeared.

War with Scotland and France

England's wish to control Scotland had suffered a major setback at Bannockburn in 1314. Many of the English had been killed, and Edward II himself had been lucky to escape. After other unsuccessful attempts England gave up its claim to overlordship of Scotland in 1328. However, it was not long before the two countries were at war again, but this time because of England's war with France.

The repeated attempts of English kings to control Scotland had led the Scots to look for allies. After Edward I's attempt to take over Scotland in 1295, the Scots turned to the obvious ally, the king of France, for whom there were clear advantages in an alliance with Scotland. This "Auld [old] Alliance"

lasted into the sixteenth century. France benefited more than Scotland from it, but both countries agreed that whenever England attacked one of them, the other would make trouble behind England's back. The alliance did not operate the whole time. There were long periods when it was not needed or used.

England's troubles with France resulted from the French king's growing authority in France, and his determination to control all his nobles, even the greatest of them. France had suffered for centuries from rebellious vassals, and the two most troublesome were the duke of Burgundy and the English king (who was still the king of France's vassal as duke of Aquitaine), both of whom refused to recognise the French king's overlordship.

To make his position stronger, the king of France began to interfere with England's trade. Part of Aquitaine, an area called Gascony, traded its fine wines for England's corn and woollen cloth. This trade was worth a lot of money to the English Crown. But in 1324 the French king seized part of Gascony. Burgundy was England's other major trading partner, because it was through Burgundy's province of Flanders (now Belgium) that almost all England's wool exports were made. Any French move to control these two areas was a direct threat to England's wealth. The king of France tried to make the duke of Burgundy accept his authority. To prevent this, England threatened Burgundy with economic collapse by stopping wool exports to Flanders. This forced the duke of Burgundy to make an alliance with England against France.

England went to war because it could not afford the destruction of its trade with Flanders. It was difficult to persuade merchants to pay for wars against the Scots or the Welsh, from which there was so little wealth to be gained. But the threat to their trade and wealth persuaded the rich merchant classes of England that war against France was absolutely necessary. The lords, knights and fighting men also looked forward to the possibility of winning riches and lands.

Edward III declared war on France in 1337. His excuse was a bold one: he claimed the right to the

French Crown. It is unlikely that anyone, except for the English, took his claim very seriously, but it was a good enough reason for starting a war. The war Edward began, later called the Hundred Years War, did not finally end until 1453, with the English Crown losing all its possessions in France except for Calais, a northern French port.

At first the English were far more successful than the French on the battlefield. The English army was experienced through its wars in Wales and in Scotland. It had learnt the value of being lightly armed, and quick in movement. Its most important weapon was the Welsh longbow, used by most of the ordinary footsoldiers. It was very effective on the battlefield because of its quick rate of fire. An experienced man could fire a second arrow into the air before the first had reached its destination. Writers of the time talk of "clouds" of arrows darkening the sky. These arrows could go through most armour. The value of the longbow was proved in two victories, at Crécy in 1346 and at Poitiers in 1356, where the French king himself was taken prisoner. The English captured a huge quantity of treasure, and it was said that after the battle of Poitiers every woman in England had a French bracelet on her arm. The French king bought his freedom for £500,000, an enormous amount of money in those days.

By the treaty of Brétigny, in 1360, Edward III was happy to give up his claim to the French throne because he had re-established control over areas previously held by the English Crown. The French recognised his ownership of all Aquitaine, including Gascony; parts of Normandy and Brittany, and the newly captured port of Calais. But because the French king had only unwillingly accepted this situation the war did not end, and fighting soon began again. All this land, except for the valuable coastal ports of Calais, Cherbourg, Brest, Bordeaux and Bayonne, was taken back by French forces during the next fifteen years. It was a warning that winning battles was a good deal easier than winning wars.

True to the "Auld Alliance" the king of Scots had attacked England in 1346, but he was defeated and

taken prisoner. English forces raided as far as Edinburgh, destroying and looting. However, Edward III allowed the French to ransom the Scots king David and, satisfied with his successes in France, Edward gave up trying to control the Scots Crown. For a while there was peace, but the struggle between the French and English kings over French territories was to continue into the fifteenth century.

The age of chivalry

Edward III and his eldest son, the Black Prince, were greatly admired in England for their courage on the battlefield and for their courtly manners. They became symbols of the “code of chivalry”, the way in which a perfect knight should behave. During the reign of Edward interest grew in the legendary King Arthur. Arthur, if he ever existed, was probably a Celtic ruler who fought the Anglo-Saxons, but we know nothing more about him. The fourteenth-century legend created around Arthur included both the imagined magic and mystery of the Celts, and also the knightly values of the court of Edward III.

According to the code of chivalry, the perfect knight fought for his good name if insulted, served God and the king, and defended any lady in need. These ideas were expressed in the legend of the Round Table, around which King Arthur and his knights sat as equals in holy brotherhood.

Edward introduced the idea of chivalry into his court. Once, a lady at court accidentally dropped her garter and Edward III noticed some of his courtiers laughing at her. He picked up the garter and tied it to his own leg, saying in French, “*Honi soit qui mal y pense*,” which meant “Let him be ashamed who sees wrong in it.” From this strange yet probably true story, the Order of the Garter was founded in 1348. Edward chose as members of the order twenty-four knights, the same number the legendary Arthur had chosen. They met once a year on St George’s Day at Windsor Castle, where King Arthur’s Round Table was supposed to have

been. The custom is still followed, and *Honi Soit Qui Mal Y Pense* is still the motto of the royal family.

Chivalry was a useful way of persuading men to fight by creating the idea that war was a noble and glorious thing. War could also, of course, be profitable. But in fact cruelty, death, destruction and theft were the reality of war, as they are today. The Black Prince, who was the living example of chivalry in England, was feared in France for his cruelty.

The century of plagues

The year 1348 brought an event of far greater importance than the creation of a new order of chivalry. This was the terrible plague, known as the Black Death, which reached almost every part of Britain during 1348–9. Probably more than one-third of the entire population of Britain died, and fewer than one person in ten who caught the plague managed to survive it. Whole villages disappeared, and some towns were almost completely deserted until the plague itself died out.

The Black Death was neither the first natural disaster of the fourteenth century, nor the last. Plagues had killed sheep and other animals earlier in the century. An agricultural crisis resulted from the growth in population and the need to produce more food. Land was no longer allowed to rest one year in three, which meant that it was over-used, resulting in years of famine when the harvest failed. This process had already begun to slow down population growth by 1300.

After the Black Death there were other plagues during the rest of the century which killed mostly the young and healthy. In 1300 the population of Britain had probably been over four million. By the end of the century it was probably hardly half that figure, and it only began to grow again in the second half of the fifteenth century. Even so, it took until the seventeenth century before the population reached four million again.

The dramatic fall in population, however, was not entirely a bad thing. At the end of the thirteenth century the sharp rise in prices had led an increasing number of landlords to stop paying workers for their labour, and to go back to serf labour in order to avoid losses. In return villagers were given land to farm, but this tenanted land was often the poorest land of the manorial estate. After the Black Death there were so few people to work on the land that the remaining workers could ask for more money for their labour. We know they did this because the king and Parliament tried again and again to control wage increases. We also know from these repeated efforts that they cannot have been successful. The poor found that they could demand more money and did so. This finally led to the end of serfdom.

Because of the shortage and expense of labour, landlords returned to the twelfth-century practice of letting out their land to energetic freeman farmers who bit by bit added to their own land. In the twelfth century, however, the practice of letting out farms had been a way of increasing the landlord's profits. Now it became a way of avoiding losses. Many "firma" agreements were for a whole life span, and some for several life spans. By the mid-fifteenth century few landlords had home farms at all. These smaller farmers who rented the manorial lands slowly became a new class, known as the "yeomen". They became an important part of the agricultural economy, and have always remained so.

Overall, agricultural land production shrank, but those who survived the disasters of the fourteenth century enjoyed a greater share of the agricultural economy. Even for peasants life became more comfortable. For the first time they had enough money to build more solid houses, in stone where it was available, in place of huts made of wood, mud and thatch.

There had been other economic changes during the fourteenth century. The most important of these was the replacement of wool by finished cloth as

England's main export. This change was the natural result of the very high prices at which English wool was sold in Flanders by the end of the thirteenth century. Merchants decided they could increase their profits further by buying wool in England at half the price for which it was sold in Flanders, and produce finished cloth for export. This process suddenly grew very rapidly after the Flemish cloth industry itself collapsed during the years 1320 to 1360. Hundreds of skilled Flemings came to England in search of work. They were encouraged to do so by Edward III because there was a clear benefit to England in exporting a finished product rather than a raw material. The surname "Fleming" has been a common one in England ever since, particularly in East Anglia, where many Flemings settled.

At the beginning of the century England had exported 30,000 sacks of raw wool but only 8,000 lengths of cloth each year. By the middle of the century it exported only 8,000 sacks of wool but 50,000 lengths of cloth, and by the end of the century this increased to well over 100,000. The wool export towns declined. They were replaced by towns and villages with fast-flowing rivers useful for the new process of cleaning and treating wool. Much of the clothmaking process, like spinning, was done in the workers' own homes. Indeed, so many young women spun wool that "spinster" became and has remained the word for an unmarried woman.

The West Country, Wales, and Yorkshire in the north all did well from the change in clothmaking. But London remained much larger and richer. By the late fourteenth century its 50,000 inhabitants were supported by trade with the outside world, especially the Baltic, Mediterranean and North Sea ports. Its nearest trade rival was Bristol.

The poor in revolt

It is surprising that the English never rebelled against Edward III. He was an expensive king at a time when many people were miserably poor and sick with plagues. At the time of the Black Death he was busy with expensive wars against France and Scotland. The demands he made on merchants and peasants were enormous, but Edward III handled these people with skill.

Edward's grandson, Richard, was less fortunate. He became king on his grandfather's death in 1377 because his father, the Black Prince, had died a few months earlier. Richard II inherited the problems of discontent but had neither the diplomatic skill of his grandfather, nor the popularity of his father. Added to this he became king when he was only eleven, and so others governed for him. In the year he became king, these advisers introduced a tax payment for every person over the age of fifteen. Two years later, this tax was enforced again. The people paid.

But in 1381 this tax was enforced for a third time and also increased to three times the previous amount. There was an immediate revolt in East Anglia and in Kent, two of the richer parts of the country. The poorer parts of the country, the north and northwest, did not rebel. This suggests that in the richer areas ordinary people had become more aware and confident of their rights and their power.

The new tax had led to revolt, but there were also other reasons for discontent. The landlords had been trying for some time to force the peasants back into serfdom, because serf labour was cheaper than paid labour. The leader of the revolt, Wat Tyler, was the first to call for fair treatment of England's poor people: "We are men formed in Christ's likeness," he claimed, "and we are kept like animals." The people sang a revolutionary rhyme suggesting that when God created man he had not made one man master over another:

When Adam delved, and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman?

The idea that God had created all people equal called for an end to feudalism and respect for

honest labour. But the Peasants' Revolt, as it was called, only lasted for four weeks. During that period the peasants took control of much of London. In fact the revolt was not only by peasants from the countryside: a number of poorer townspeople also revolted, suggesting that the discontent went beyond the question of feudal service. When Wat Tyler was killed, Richard II skilfully quietened the angry crowd. He promised to meet all the people's demands, including an end to serfdom, and the people peacefully went home.

As soon as they had gone, Richard's position changed. Although he did not try to enforce the tax, he refused to keep his promise to give the peasants their other demands. "Serfs you are," he said, "and serfs you shall remain." His officers hunted down other leading rebels and hanged them. But the danger of revolt by the angry poor was a warning to the king, the nobles and to the wealthy of the city of London.

Heresy and orthodoxy

The Peasants' Revolt was the first sign of growing discontent with the state. During the next century discontent with the Church also grew. There had already been a few attacks on Church property in towns controlled by the Church. In 1381 one rebel priest had called for the removal of all bishops and archbishops, as well as all the nobles.

The greed of the Church was one obvious reason for its unpopularity. The Church was a feudal power, and often treated its peasants and townspeople with as much cruelty as the nobles did. There was another reason why the people of England disliked paying taxes to the pope. Edward's wars in France were beginning to make the English conscious of their "Englishness" and the pope was a foreigner. To make matters worse the pope had been driven out of Rome, and was living in Avignon in France. It seemed obvious to the English that the pope must be on the French side, and that the taxes they paid to the Church were actually helping France against England. This was a matter on which the king and people in England agreed. The king reduced the amount of tax money

the pope could raise in Britain, and made sure that most of it found its way into his own treasury instead.

One might have expected the bishops and clergy to oppose the king. They did not, because almost all of them were English and came from noble families, and so shared the political views of the nobility. Most of them had been appointed by the king and some of them also acted as his officers. When the peasants stormed London in 1381 they executed the Archbishop of Canterbury, who was also the king's chancellor. It was unlikely that his killers saw much difference between the two offices. Archbishop or chancellor, he was part of an oppressive establishment.

Another threat to the Church during the fourteenth century was the spread of religious writings, which were popular with an increasingly literate population. These books were for use in private prayer and dealt with the death of Jesus Christ, the lives of the Saints and the Virgin Mary. The increase in private prayer was a direct threat to the authority of the Church over the religious life of the population. This was because these writings allowed people to pray and think independently of Church control. Private religious experience and the increase of knowledge encouraged people to challenge the Church's authority, and the way it used this to advance its political influence.

Most people were happy to accept the continued authority of the Church, but some were not. At the end of the fourteenth century new religious ideas appeared in England which were dangerous to Church authority, and were condemned as heresy. This heresy was known as "Lollardy", a word which probably came from a Latin word meaning "to say prayers". One of the leaders of Lollardy was John Wycliffe, an Oxford professor. He believed that everyone should be able to read the Bible in English, and to be guided by it in order to save their soul. He therefore translated it from Latin, finishing the work in 1396. He was not allowed to publish his new Bible in England, and was forced to leave Oxford. However, both he and the other Lollards were admired by those nobles and scholars who

were critical of the Church, its wealth and the poor quality of its clergy.

If the Lollards had been supported by the king, the English Church might have become independent from the papacy in the early fifteenth century. But Richard's successor, Henry IV, was not sympathetic. He was deeply loyal to the Church, and in 1401 introduced into England for the first time the idea of executing the Lollards by burning. Lollardy was not well enough organised to resist. In the next few years it was driven underground, and its spirit was not seen again for a century.